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C O N F I D E N T I A L MANILA 000407

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TAGS: PREL PTER MARR RP

SUBJECT: MNLF FREES "GUESTS" IN EXCHANGE FOR TRIPARTITE PROMISE

REF: BELLARD/OPS CENTER TELCONS

Classified By: DCM Paul W. Jones, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) Elements of the Moro National Liberation Front under Commander Habier Malik on February 4 released Brigadier General Benjamin Dolorfino (commander of the Armed Forces' National Capital Region command and the highest ranking Muslim army officer), Undersecretary for the Peace Process General Ramon Santos, and more than a dozen others after two days at the MNLF's Camp Bitan-ag on Jolo Island. BG Dolorfino insisted to the media that he and the others were "not taken hostage, but we were hosted." Malik separately denied having taken anyone hostage, claiming that the real reason for the long stay was a detailed discussion about peace in the Sulu Archipelago. Both sides confirmed that preparatory tripartite talks among the Organization of Islamic Conference, the MNLF, and the Philippine government will now take place in Jeddah March 17-18 to review implementation of the 1996 peace accord with the MNLF.

¶2. (C) Undersecretary for the Peace Process Nabil Tan and Undersecretary for Local and Interior Government Marius Corpus separately denied to Pol/C on February 5 that the Philippine government had agreed to release MNLF founder Nur Misuari, in detention near Manila since leading an abortive rebellion in 2001. They insisted that the only condition for the release of BG Dolorfino was setting firm new dates for the tripartite talks, which were originally intended to take place in early February.

¶3. (C) Comment: The action by Nur Misuari supporters in the MNLF -- however much both sides tried to avoid the "hostage" terminology -- has already provoked negative media commentary, highlighting that the MNLF remains an armed group despite the 1996 peace accord. It also raised memories of the deadly conflict with the MNLF's Misuari Breakaway Group on Jolo in February 2005. The Philippine government had quietly been considering releasing Nur Misuari in any event, and permitted him recently to fly for a day to Jolo to register as a voter, fueling speculation that he intends to run for governor in the May 2007 elections. This embarrassing episode should now make it more difficult for the government to take such a conciliatory step, although it may well let him take part in tripartite talks, if not during the upcoming preparatory round, then in a subsequent meeting.

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